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## Gretzky, Lemieux, and the NHL Playoffs

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, [richard.crepeau@ucf.edu](mailto:richard.crepeau@ucf.edu)

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It's playoff time. In the National Hockey League and the National Basketball Association the second season, the real season, is underway. Every game now has an increased significance, and when you get to the final game of a series there is nothing else like it in sport. When both teams face elimination the level of play is raised to extraordinary heights.

I realize that most sports fans in Central Florida are watching the NBA. But I would urge you on one or two nights to turn to hockey, where two of the greatest hockey players of all-time are now on display. Wayne Gretzky and Mario Lemieux are playing out two of the magnificent sport stories of this, or any other year.

Who can believe that just weeks after having taken radiation therapy for Hodgkins disease, Mario Lemieux is dominating his sport? When he went down earlier in the year, I really doubted if he would be back this season. The toll that the radiation treatment takes on the human body would certainly drain Lemieux of sufficient energy to sustain him through a hockey match. But that has not been the case. He is back skating with tremendous speed and overpowering opponents with his strength. It seems at times that Lemieux can will a goal for the Penguins.

Only his chronic back problems seem capable of slowing him down, or keeping him off the ice, not the problems with Hodgkins disease. Not only has Super Mario come back, but he has come back at the same level he left, and this makes the Penguins, a very good team without him, the odds on favorite to achieve a three-peat in the Stanley Cup sweepstakes.

As for back trouble, you may recall that Wayne Gretzky was out for over half the regular season with a back injury that many people were predicting was career ending. Gretzky too returned to action well before anyone had expected, and for the last two months he has been slowly but surely playing himself into shape. Now that the playoffs have begun he is at the top of his game.

In the series against Calgary he played outstanding hockey, making passes like only Gretzky can, and inspiring his team to great play. He is skating very well and hitting those pinpoint passes from impossible angles. No one has ever played the game this well, and now it would seem Gretzky has recaptured the

magical qualities that made him the leader of the Edmonton juggernaut for so many years.

He is repeating this performance in the Vancouver series where the heavily favored Canucks are getting everything they can handle from Gretzky and the Kings. In Game Two of the series, which was available on ESPN, he put on a Gretzky clinic of passing, scoring, and defense. All facets of the game are played well by both of these superstars.

While watching that game I noticed that repeatedly the Great One was grimacing. Something was obviously causing him some pain. It was announced after the game that Gretzky had cracked a rib against Calgary, that although he was playing in great pain he would continue to play as long as possible. And please take note Wayne Gretzky is leading the playoffs in points scored.

And so both of these great hockey players, the two best of all-time, are on the ice against all odds and giving their very best. Both are playing at the highest level. Both are playing in pain. This is professional athletics, hockey, and just plain sport at its very best. It should not be missed even at the cost of some of the basketball action. It simply doesn't get any better than this.

It could be that both the Kings and Penguins will make it to the Stanley Cup Final, and Lemieux and Gretzky will be on the ice at the same time. The Kings were heavy underdogs to Vancouver but now are on the verge of winning that series, proving that it is foolish to count out a Gretzky led team. If the Kings defeat the Canucks, they should then make it to the final to face the Penguins who appear headed for their three-peat as Stanley Cup Champions.

Whatever happens don't miss this chance to see the two greatest hockey players of all time. It may be one of the last times that you will be able to see both Gretzky and Lemieux, numbers 99 and 66 playing at the top of their games at the same time and maybe on the same ice.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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